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ABSTRACT

The paper sets forth the position of the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities regarding definitions of learning disabilities (LD) as found in P.L. 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act. The paper cites difficulties with the current definition, suggesting that misinterpretation has given the impression that individuals with LD are a homogeneous group. The committee recommends that the term LD be recognized as a general label with different subgroups. Other recommendations address the need for recognizing that adults also may have LD, affirming inherently altered processes of acquiring and using information as a basis of LD, and not restricting LD to individuals without other handicapping conditions or in different cultural and linguistic groups (as the "exclusion clause" in P.L. 94-142 may be interpreted to do). An alternative definition of LD is proposed. (CL)

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LEARNING DISABILITIES: ISSUES ON DEFINITION

A position paper prepared by the
National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities
January 30, 1981

The enactment of P.L. 94-142 has rightly mandated changes in the assessment and education of individuals with varying handicapping conditions. The law has provided the basis for securing a systematic methodology for the identification, assessment and education of children with handicaps. Of specific interest to the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD) are those individuals identified categorically within the law as having learning disabilities.

The federal law states that an individual may have a learning disability when a severe discrepancy exists between achievement and intellectual ability in one or more of the following areas: oral expression, listening comprehension, written expression, basic reading skills, reading comprehension, mathematical calculation and mathematical reasoning. While the law has specified the areas of deficits that constitute learning disabilities, there remain widespread problems with the definition, methods for identifying the individuals to be served, and problems in delineating the assessment team's membership and responsibilities. The following position paper of the NJCLD addresses problems resulting from the current definition of learning disabilities.

The Definition of Learning Disabilities

In 1967 the National Advisory Committee on Handicapped Children (NACHC) developed a definition of learning disabilities, a definition that is quoted widely and is included in P.L. 94-142. While other definitions of learning disabilities exist among different professional organizations and state education agencies, it was the NACHC definition that provided the basis for legislation and funding that resulted in the establishment of education programs for children with learning disabilities and programs for the training of professionals. Numerous positive effects have been realized through the definition and general goals of P.L. 94-142. However, interpretation of the definition has resulted in a series of problems that have affected theoretical and service-delivery issues in learning disabilities. Some of these issues include the following:

1. The current definition frequently has been misinterpreted, and this has led many people to regard those with learning disabilities as a homogeneous group of individuals. This conclusion is clearly erroneous. It has led to the belief that a standard approach to assessment and educational management exists for individuals with learning disabilities. The practices of identification, assessment and remediation were keyed to this interpretation of the definition with resulting confusion in these areas.

The NJCLD urges that "learning disabilities" be recognized as a general term referring to a heterogeneous group of disorders. These disorders are realized as significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of one or more of the following functions: listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning and mathematical abilities. Individuals with such disabilities may also evidence problems in their ability to self-regulate behaviors and demonstrate altered patterns of social perception and social interaction. Furthermore, the fact

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that the learning disabled population includes different subgroups of individuals can no longer be ignored. An integration of the results of past and current research and clinical-educational experience related to these subgroups is essential to identifying the "who" in learning disabilities.

2. The use of "children" in the current definition limits the applicability of the term "learning disabilities." This results in a failure to recognize the developmental nature of learning disabilities. Indeed, learning disabilities must be viewed as a problem not only of the school years, but of early childhood and continuing into adult life.

3. The etiology of learning disabilities is not stated clearly within the current definition but is implied by a listing of terms and disorders. The NJCLD urges that the disorders represented by the collective term "learning disabilities" are understood as intrinsic to the individual and that the basis of the disorders is presumed to be due to central nervous system dysfunction. While the NJCLD supports the idea that failure to learn or to attain curricular expectations occurs for diverse reasons, learning disabilities have their basis in inherently altered processes of acquiring and using information. It is essential to understand this notion if one is to appreciate the resultant interaction between the learner and the learning environments. An understanding of this interaction facilitates the development of effective service delivery models and adaptive curriculum. This also leads to a clearer understanding of the ways in which individuals with learning disabilities may interact in a life-long social and cultural milieu.

The NJCLD believes that the idea of central nervous system dysfunction as a basis for learning disabilities is appropriate. This must not, however, restrict the identification of a learning disability to the physician. In fact, many individuals with manifest central nervous system dysfunction, such as individuals with cerebral palsy, do not necessarily evidence learning disorders. For the individual with learning disabilities, evidence of central nervous system dysfunction may or may not be elicited during the course of a medical-neurological examination. The critical elements in the diagnosis of learning disabilities are elicited during psychological, educational and/or language assessments.

An understanding of etiological mechanisms (a) facilitates a determination of prognosis, (b) provides information to individuals and their families that helps to clarify their understanding of the manifest disorder(s), and (c) provides direction for research studies that will influence educational practice.

4. The wording of the "exclusion clause" in the current definition of learning disabilities lends itself to the misinterpretation that individuals with learning disabilities cannot be multihandicapped or be from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. It is essential to understand and recognize the learning disabilities as they might occur within varying handicapping conditions as well as different cultural and linguistic groups. Individuals within these groups frequently have received inappropriate educational assessment, planning and instruction.

The NJCLD supports the idea that learning disabilities are not the primary and direct result of other handicapping conditions and should not be so confused. However, the NJCLD notes specifically that learning disabilities may occur concomitantly with other handicapping conditions. While these individuals may be served educationally through different service modes, a denial of the existence of significant learning disabilities will result in inappropriate assessment and educational instruction and can result in the denial of direct or indirect professional services.

In light of the preceding discussion, the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities recommends the following definition of learning disabilities:

> Learning disabilities is a generic term that refers to a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning or mathematical abilities. These disorders are intrinsic to the individual and presumed to be due to central nervous system dysfunction.
>
> Even though a learning disability may occur concomitantly with other handicapping conditions (e.g., sensory impairment, mental retardation, social and emotional disturbance) or environmental influences (e.g., cultural differences, insufficient/inappropriate instruction, psychogenic factors), it is not the direct result of those conditions or influences.

The National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities is a Committee of cooperating organizations concerned with individuals with learning disabilities. Organizations represented are:

Association for Children and Adults with Learning Disabilities
American Speech-Language-Hearing Association
Council for Learning Disabilities
Division for Children with Communication Disorders, Council for Exceptional Children
International Reading Association
The Orton Dyslexia Society

This is a final draft copy of a position paper of the NJCLD. This copy has been forwarded for final approval and adoption to the governing body of the member assocations, and final adoption is pending.

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